

A Resilience-Based Approach to Exploring Non-Binary Identities

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BACKGROUND

Non-binary people – those who identify as not exclusively male or female – are an emerging gender minority group that are underrepresented in the literature. The simultaneous invisibility of non-binary identities along with hostility against those who do not conform to binary norms places non-binary people at risk for feeling isolated and unsupported. This study explored how non-binary people are resilient including challenges and helpful factors to gender identity development.

Challenges of existing literature:

- Non-binary is regularly excluded from demographic data collection
- When included in literature, non-binary data is typically reported with binary transgender data that does not illuminate each unique experience
- Small sample size of non-binary participants, limiting sophisticated analysis and generalization of findings
- Research primarily deficit-based (e.g., health disparities)

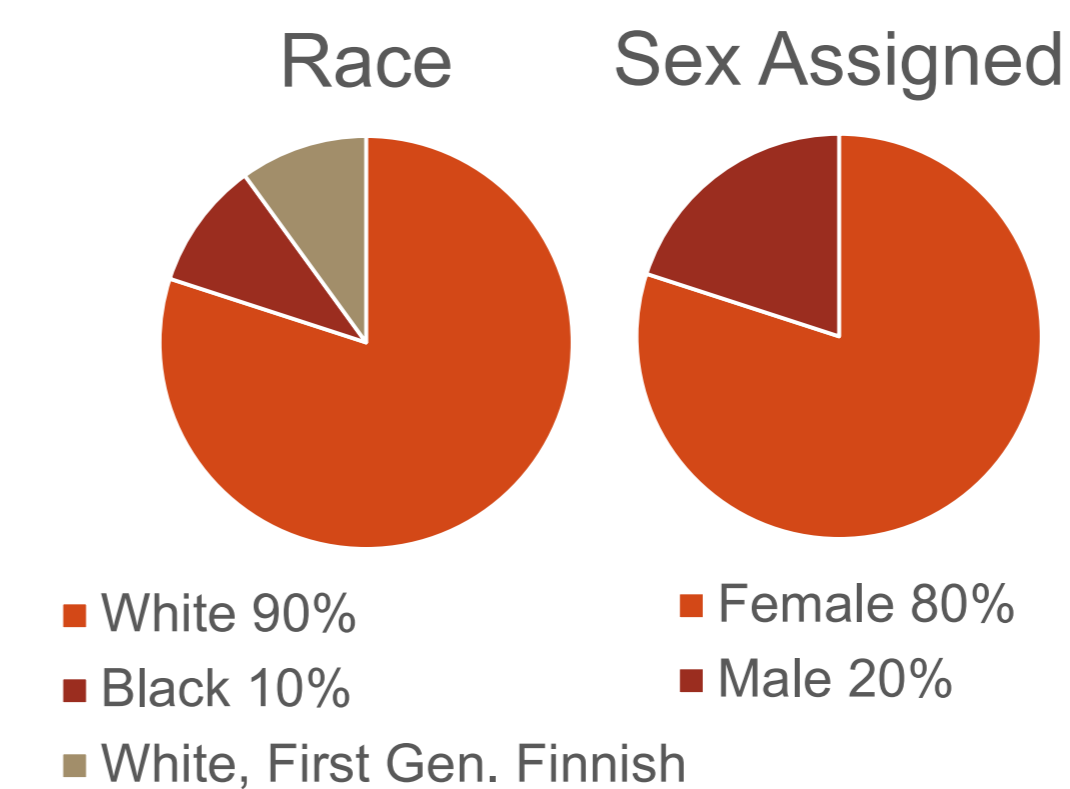
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does gender identity develop for persons who identify as not exclusively male or female (non-binary)?
2. How are non-binary individuals resilient?

METHODS

Grounded Theory analysis

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews
 - pre-coding
 - analytic jotting
 - line-by-line coding
 - focused coding
 - axial coding
 - theoretical coding
 - and constant comparison



Participants

- Non-binary individuals ($N=10$) ages 23 to 61 ($M=33.80$, $SD=12.66$)
- Recruited using convenience and snowball sampling through social media, flyers, and community leaders
- Highly homogenous sample by race and sex assigned at birth

Study Participant Descriptives					
#	Gender	Age	Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Age of gender exploration
1	Non-binary and Gender Fluid	23	Ne/Nem/Nir or They/Them	Queer/Pansexual	22 (2016)
2	Trans masculine exploring Non-Binary	53	He/Him	Heterosexual (formerly lesbian)	51 (2015)
3	"Nebulous" (genderqueer)	31	She/Her	Gay/Lesbian	29 (2015)
4	Gender Fuck or Genderqueer	29	They/Them	Bisexual	27 (2015)
5	Gender fluid, Non-Binary	61	She/Her	Pansexual / omnisexual	58 (2014)
6	Non-Binary Femme	28	She/Her or They/Them	Human/Lesbian/Skoliosexual	24 (2013)
7	Androgen	26	He/She/They	Bisexual	22 (2013)
8	Genderqueer	33	She/Her (for now)	Lesbian	28 (2012)
9	Gender Neutral	27	She/any	Lesbian	21 (2011)
10	Gender Fluid	27	They/Them	Pansexual	18 (2006)

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Risk Factors and Challenges

- Those who were also sexual minorities struggled with having an additional marginalized identity – “I really didn’t just want to hold another identity. I didn’t want something else to set me apart. I know that sounds so crappy, but when you went through what I went through...I can’t be one more thing!”
- Racial minorities “don’t get to have gender” – “people don’t ask feminine presenting people how they identify...People don’t ask about it [pronouns] – and especially here [Midwest] and especially in my black body. They’re for sure not checking for that...because it’s already enough that I’m gay and black at the same time because they’re like, you’re doing the most right now... And then add that [gender] on top of it, too, they’re like, ‘my god! how much space are you gonna take up?’ A lot apparently!”
- Older Adults reported lack of awareness and opportunity for exploring gender – “When we were of your age, you were gay or you were straight. You’re a gay man or you’re a lesbian. And those were the options.”
- Non-binary identities experienced as either invisible or misunderstood – “I don’t think people know what non-binary or gender fluid [are]...I don’t know if I’ll come out and say I’m non-binary. I may at some point if it becomes more known...but I don’t know – if they don’t know what that is.”
- Similar to binary trans women, non-binary people who were DMAB face additional stigma to exploring of gender identity – “I think it’s probably harder for people to assign male at birth especially in this society... the concept of fragile masculinity is very true... What’s the worst insult a little boy can hear? ‘You hit like a girl’... the expectations in a lot of ways are so restrictive.”

RESULTS

- Non-binary identities experienced as either invisible or misunderstood – “I don’t think people know what non-binary or gender fluid [are]...I don’t know if I’ll come out and say I’m non-binary. I may at some point if it becomes more known...but I don’t know – if they don’t know what that is.”
- Feeling oppressed even within the LGBT community (e.g., hostility towards passing privilege) – “I could be gay, but I could not have any kind of gender issues.”
- Traumatic interpersonal relationships that enforced masculine/dominant and feminine/submissive dichotomy

Protective Factors and Assets

- Supportive relationships in which individuals felt wholly seen and accepted were significant for non-binary gender identity development – “I put myself in spaces where I felt safe...I put myself around a lot of queer people, which isn’t necessarily always safe...but places where I felt safe – around people who I felt safe with so that I could have those conversations and have those explorations”
- Language acquisition – “I don’t even think I had the terminology for it – it being me – until maybe like a year ago or maybe two years ago and then I was like “ok! I get it now!” I’m not even sure that there was terminology until recently.”
- Affirming healthcare providers – “I actually can’t praise my therapist enough...she was the first line of acceptance.”
- Many noted a positive correlation between increase in social support and increase in self-confidence

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Resilience

- Self-reframing of risk factors and challenges (e.g., traumatic interpersonal relationships as catalysts for gender identity)
- Invisibility as an opportunity – “I think maybe being older people are less likely to A) notice you and B) single you out.”
- Participants spoke of their non-binary identity as a benefit, as something additive to their sense of self – “It’s not this or that [male or female], it’s yes and.”
- Sharing their gender identity created more authentic connections with others – “It’s given me better connections with people – more authentic connections because I’m being honest about who I am.”
- Many reported feeling empowered by their gender expression and, ultimately, liberated from gender norms and criticisms
- Empowerment through labels – “The beautiful thing about the genderqueer identity – it doesn’t box you in, it doesn’t limit you, so it’s still a label, but you’re a lot more free under it and so I think what that identity has taught me is that these identities are important to me, they’re something I’ll fight for, they’re something I’ll fight for other people...you can’t understand me without understanding my identities. They’re a crucial part of me but they are not the only part of me and I don’t have to be constrained.”
- Perseverance through gender identity development helped increase empathy for other marginalized populations
- Through their work in the community, participants described the great responsibility and significance of becoming a role model for other non-binary people of all ages, races, and stages of exploration

RESULTS

Internal vs External Comfort with Gender Identity

- A significant difference existed, $t(7)=6.780, p<.001$
- External challenges included invisibility, struggling to find a place, barriers to expression, and unhealthy environments
- Internal challenges primarily concerned feeling isolated, overcoming traumatic experiences with others related to gender, and anticipation of negative experiences
- Slowly shedding social’s expectations of normal as part of gender identity development – “[gender] is something I’m still exploring...knowing that I don’t have to be what society would say is *normal*...really knowing that it is ok to identify outside the binary is pretty new”
- Most participants said they would share their gender identity if asked – “Now I’m at the point where I am...it’s an open secret...if I am directly asked, I will answer honestly, but I don’t put myself out there”

“I don’t know how you would educate people, but I suppose it’s like the gay movement...it just kept getting more and more people heard more and more about it and then it got accepted more and more, so now we have to get out there and educate places about it”

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DISCUSSION

The complexity of a non-binary gender identity comes from the abstract conceptualization beyond social constructs and the use of pronouns that grammatically challenges many people. The simultaneous invisibility of gender identities and hostility against dismantling binary norms paired with lack of role models place non-binary persons at risk for feeling isolated, unsupported, and confused about their gender.

The study found that non-binary people are more comfortable internally than externally with their gender, indicating potential sociopolitical and environmental interventions to decrease barriers to healthy gender identity development.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Social workers can benefit from applying these findings to create supportive interactions and environments for non-binary people

- Importance of language for visibility, acceptance, and openness to exploring gender identity
- Normalization of sharing pronouns
- Need for paperwork and policies to reflect gender diversity that affirms non-binary identities
- The importance of “trying on” gender neutral pronouns in a safe space before deciding to adopt entirely

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is necessary to explore the unique experience of non-binary people and to contribute to inclusive and affirming best-practices and policy including:

- Predictive factors for well-developed non-binary gender identities
- Intersectionality with other identities, specifically age cohorts and race
- Prevalence of non-binary identities to create visibility to this subpopulation
- Cross-cultural and international comparisons could be beneficial in identifying similarities and differences in challenges and resilience

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